



Ambitious Rebels: Remaking Honor, Law, and Liberalism in Venezuela, 1780-1850

Reuben Zahler

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Murder, street brawls, marital squabbles, infidelity, official corruption, public insults, and rebellion are just a few of the social layers Reuben Zahler investigates as he studies the dramatic shifts in Venezuela as it transformed from a Spanish colony to a modern republic. His book *Ambitious Rebels* illuminates the enormous changes in honor, law, and political culture that occurred and how ordinary men and women promoted or rejected those changes.

In a highly engaging style, Zahler examines gender and class against the backdrop of Venezuelan institutions and culture during the late colonial period through post-independence (known as the “middle period”). His fine-grained analysis shows that liberal ideals permeated the elite and popular classes to a substantial degree while Venezuelan institutions enjoyed impressive levels of success. Showing remarkable ambition, Venezuela’s leaders aspired to transform a colony that adhered to the king, the church, and tradition into a liberal republic with minimal state intervention, a capitalistic economy, freedom of expression and religion, and an elected, representative government.

Subtle but surprisingly profound changes of a liberal nature occurred, as evidenced by evolving standards of honor, appropriate gender roles, class and race relations, official conduct, courtroom evidence, press coverage, economic behavior, and church-state relations. This analysis of the philosophy of the elites and the daily lives of common men and women reveals in particular the unwritten, unofficial norms that lacked legal sanction but still greatly affected political structures.

Relying on extensive archival resources, Zahler focuses on Venezuela but provides a broader perspective on Latin American history. His examination provides a comprehensive look at intellectual exchange across the Atlantic, comparative conditions throughout the Americas, and the tension between traditional norms and new liberal standards in a postcolonial society.

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